

The Basilica of Ballsh where Boris, the Bulgarian Tsar, was Baptized



Archaeology

Keywords: Basilica of Ballsh, Episcopate of Gllavenica, Epitaph of Gllavenica, Robert de Monteforte, King Boris.

Melsi Labi

PhD candidate & Director of National Historical Museum, Tirana (Albania)

Abstract

The Basilica of Ballsh was the most important center of the late Antiquity and of the Middle Ages in the Episcopate of Gllavenica. The Basilica was a monastery church, which time after time was expanded with auxiliary facilities. The basilica was first built in the 6th century and it had 2 phases of reconstruction, in the 11th century and in 12th century. Gllavenica is mentioned during the first Norman disembarkation in the Albanian coast during the end of the 9th century. During the second Norman campaign of the years 1107-1108, the Norman noble Robert de Monteforte was killed in Gllavenica. Even while retaining the title of Duke, he was promptly buried and on his grave was placed the column of stone on which the inscription of the return of King Boris to Christianity was inscribed.

The Basilica of Ballsh was the most important center of the late Antiquity and of the Middle Ages in the Episcopate of Gllavenica. The Basilica was a monastery church, which time after time was expanded with auxiliary facilities. The basilica was first built in the 6th century and it had 2 phases of reconstruction, in the 11th century and in 12th century.²⁶

In order to build up the church²⁷ materials from the palaeochristian churches of Bylis were used, like columns parts, chapels, pilaster, pedestals, etc. One of the palaeochristian architectural elements that were found in the church of Ballshi was a monolithic column, on which the inscription of Pakatianoï was vertically carved. The inscription was discovered in 1904 from the University of Vienna professor, Karl Patch. It is carved on a monolithic pilaster made of white marble. Pilaster is decorated with grapes and with grape vines, which are masterfully carved. It preserves traces that led us into thinking that it has served as a column put in the right side of the entrance of an altar.²⁸



Fig.1. The inscription of Pakatinoi

²⁶ A. MEKSI, Arkitektura Paleokristianë në Shqipëri, *Monumentet*, 2, 1985, p. 21.

²⁷ The church is of the basilical type, three-aisled with narthex and exonarthex. The basilica is sized 22.50x17.20 m. Each of the naves ends with apses, 2 of which in a semicircular form, while the one standing in the centre is trihedral. Inside the apse a podium is found with three stairs. The narthex was connected with the naos by 2 doors, while a third door connected the church with the chapel. The basilicas walls are built by stone connected with reddish mortar and with brick belts. A. MEKSI, *Arkitektura e kishave të Shqipërisë*, Uegen, Tirana, 2004, p. 26-27.

²⁸ K. ZHEKU, Gllavenica dhe problemi i lokalizimit të saj, *Monumentet*, 2, 1987, p. 97.

The stones sides are decorated with floral ornaments. On the main side a wide frame is found, notched and with a rod of pearls which encloses a narrow field.

Underneath you can find an ornament of grape vines styled with 2 birds, which are put in a symmetrical fashion. This inscription means: -Pakatianoï, praying to the Lord along with his wife Aglaia and his daughter Pakta, dedicate this church to Saint Andrea.²⁹

Also, as construction materials, there were used columns containing the inscription of the return of King Boris to Christianity (9th century) and of the Epitaph of Robert de Monteforte (12th century), also of Viktorins inscriptions. The four blocks of palaeochristian inscriptions were brought from Bylis to Ballsh just in order to be used as construction stones. The inscriptions carved into the walls were discovered by the archaeologist Skënder Anamali during the excavations of the years 1975-1983. This is the content of the inscriptions:

1. O stranger, don't look away from the beauty of Bylis, the surrounding walls, once in ruin, were rebuilt by the courageous Viktorin.
2. With the providence of the Lord, and of the Virgin Lord-bearer, serving to the goals and äays of Justinian, the omnipotent ruler that raised the castles of Myria, Skythia, of the territories of Iliricum, and of Thrace, Viktorin himself, a man of strategic importance, built with devotion the surrounding walls of Bylis.



Fig.2. Stone block with inscription



Fig.3. Stone block with inscription

3. I shall not complain anymore, and I shall not be afraid of the barbarians, because I found at the Great Viktorin, one that builds with his own bare hands.

4. Never shall succumb to the gaps of oblivion, the name of the omnipotent Justinian, nor the incalculable long time, shall not vanish the efforts of Viktorin, whose virtues are held in a high regard, with pride.

The first inscription was lost during the First World War, while the other three inscriptions were found during the excavations of the year 1983 and are currently held at the Archeological Museum of Tirana.³⁰

In the ancient section of the National Historical Museum, a pilaster and an arch from the basilica in Ballsh, are found. In the front side of the pilaster a dish from which 2 grape clusters are going out, are carved.

These form two medallions. The first one displays a bird with a grape cluster, while on the second one a donkey biting a grape is displayed.

²⁹ K. ZHEKU, Krishtërimi në Shqipëri gjatë shekujve V-VI, *Ngjallja*, mars 1994, p. 9; K. ZHEKU, *Peshkopata e Bylisit-një nga peshkopatat më të hershme në Shqipëri*, 2000 vjet art dhe kulturë kishtarë në Shqipëri, Tirana 2003.

³⁰ From the inscriptions mentioned above, it is clearly understood that Viktorin only made the reconstruction of the walls of Bylis. Viktorin was a well known architect for his military fortifications. He is portrayed with epithets such as "courageous", "the great", "with strategical skills", etc. The poems were made between the years 549-550. M. ZEQU, *Hulumtime Arkeologjike*, Albanopol, Tirana 2009, p. 134-135.



Fig.4. Arch from Saint Mary's church in Ballsh



Fig.5. Pilaster from Saint Mary's church in Ballsh

The arch is made of white marble. In its frontal side four belts with different motifs are carved. The two upper belts are a notched row and a rope row. The central ropes main motif is a palm flower, surrounded by two clusters, which form a circle. The lower part has got the form of a moon sickle. In the two sides of a small cross you can see a waving branch, and in the spaces formed by the waving you can see half-palmate figures.

Near the Lord-bearers Sleep church in Ballsh, were the rooms of the monastery, which are mentioned in a document of the year 1019 of the emperor Basil II. Which gave the right to the monastery to surround itself with a large wall, in order to protect itself from enemy attacks.³¹ There have been controversial thoughts regarding the localization of the Episcopate of Gllavenica.

³¹ N. CEKA, S. MUÇAJ, *Bylisi*, Migjeni, Tirana 2004, p. 104.

Theofan Popa localizes Gllavenica in today's Ballsh.³² This version was reinforced by the archeological digging made by Skënder Anamali during the year 1980.³³ Whilst Koço Zheku, in 1987, localized e Gllavenica in Bylis.³⁴

Gllavenica is mentioned in the inscriptions written in ancient greek by the name Κεφαληνια-Κεφαλονια, Γλαβηνιτζα-Γλαβενιτζα from the 9th century until the year 1751. The earliest document being the inscription found in the rubble of the church of Ballshi, which spoke of the return of King Boric to the Christian faith.

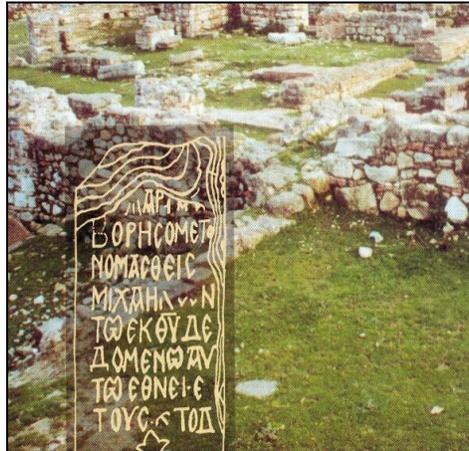


Fig.6. The rubble of the church of Saint Mary in Ballsh



Fig.7. Boris, the king of bulgarians

During the First World War, an Austrian officer named Kamilo Prashniker discovered in Ballsh of Mallakastra an inscription in byzantine greek inscribed in a 1.60 meter long marble column: ...εβαπτίστη ο αρχων Βουλγαρείας Βορης ο μετονομασθεις Μιχαηλ συν τω εκ Θε(ου)ύ δεδομενω αυτω εθνει. ε(ις) τους σ τ ο δ (6374=866). “....the ruler of Bulgaria Tzar Boris was baptized, named Mihal along with his people, given from the Lord in the year 6374”.³⁵

³² TH. POPA, Glavenica e lashtë dhe Ballshi i sotëm, *Studime Historike*, 2, 1964, p. 240.

³³ S. ANAMALI, Bazilika e Ballshit, *Iliria*, 7-8, 1977-1978, p. 301-306.

³⁴ K. ZHEKU, Gllavenica dhe problemi i lokalizimit të saj, *Monumentet*, 2, 1987, p. 97.

³⁵ TH. POPA, *Mbishkrime të kishave në Shqipëri*, Tiranë 1998, p. 79.

The inscription was found in 1918, from the austrian soldiers while they were quarrying for stone in the rubble of the church of Ballshi, and it was sent to Durrës, in the place where archeological objects were kept. The inscription dates the year 6374, which is given according to the byzantine calendar, while according to the new Gregorian calendar it dates to the year 866 AD.

Boris' baptism was held during a magnificent ceremony, while the byzantine emperor Mihail III (842-867) was made his godfather, by one of his representatives. Boris (852-889) took the name of his godfather, Mihail.

In the year 886, Boris sent as a missionary in Gllavenica, Klement of Ohrid (886-916). On his biography, written by Theofilaktus (1094-1107) is noted the fact that: "Boris awarded to the Saint places to rest in both Ohrid and in Gllavenica". According to the bishop of Ohrid, Dhimitër Homatiani (1216-1234), we learn the fact that: "Klement spent most of his time in Ohrid and in Kefalini, which in the Bulgarian language was called Gllavenica". We also learn that Klement built some churches in Gllavenica. But the question is raised of where were these churches built and where were these resting places that King Boris gifted to the saint located? In the year 1970, when the Refinery of Ballsh was being built, a wide area was digged and no church rubble was found, or not even signs of a surrounding wall. The only thing being found was the rubble of the monastery of Saint Mary in Ballsh.

In the Churchs Constitution of emperor Leon, in the year 886 the Metropolitanate of Durrës had these episcopates: 1. Stefanika, 2. Hanubia, 3. Kruja, 4. Elissoj, 5. Dioklia, 6. Shkodra, 7. Drivast, 8. Palathët, 9. Glavenica or Akrorkeraunia, 10. Avlona, 11. Lihnid, 12. Cermenika, 13. Pulqeripol, 14. Gradica, but for still unknown reasons during 1280 all of the episcopates of the Metropolitanate of Durrës were passed under the Archdiocese of Ohrid. In the episcopates classification, Gllavenica is placed ninth. According to Anthim Aleksudhi, Kanina was part of the Episcopate of Glavenica or Akrorkeraunia. Years later the residence of the episcopate was moved to the Gumenica village of the Vlora district.³⁶

In the year 1018, after the collapse of the Bulgarian state of Samuel a new great independent Archdiocese was created, which was the Archdiocese of Ohrid. The emperor Basil II, the Bulgar Slayer, in the year 1020 has issued three important decretes for the Archdiocese of Ohrid, where John was appointed the Archbishop of Ohrid and had under his jurisdiction 32 episcopates, which were: 1. Achrida (Ohri), which was the residence of the archbishop, 2. Kastoria (Kosturi), 3. Glabinitza (Gllavinica), 4. Moglaena (Moglena), 5. Buetis (Vuteli in Pelagoni or today's Manastiri), 6. Strumnitza (Strumnica), 7. Morobisdos (Morovizda), 8. Belebusda (Velevuzda), 9. Triaditza (Triadica, Sofia), 10. Nisos (Nishi), 11. Branitza (Vranica), 12. Belegrada (Berat), 13. Thronia (Striamos, Zemlin), 14. Skopia (Skopje), 15. Prizdriana (Prizren), 16. Lipainion (Lipjan), 17. Serbia (Servia, a city in Southëest Macedonia), 18. Dristra (Drster), 19. Bodina (Vidin), 20. Rhasos (Rasa, Novipazar), 21. Horaeja (Oreja), 22. Tzernikos (Cernik, maybe Cërriku), 23. Chimaira (Himara), 24. Adrianupilos (Drinopolis), 25. is erased, 26. Bothroton (Butrint), 27. Joannina (Janina), 28. Kozila (Kozili), 29. Petros (Petra), 30. Rogia, 31. Stagoi, 32. Berroia.

As you can see from the order, the episcopate of Gllavenica was placed third. In the diploma of the year 1019, 17 episcopates are included, where Gllavenica is placed third, again, with 40 clerics and 40 parik (croppers). This fact shows that we're talking about a really big episcopate under the influence of the Archdiocese of Ohrid.³⁷

³⁶ Α. ΑΛΕΞΟΔΗ, *Σύντομος Ιστορική Περιγραφή της Γερασ Μητροπόλεως Βελεγραδων*, Κερκυρα 1868, p. 46.

³⁷ Α. ΜΕΚΣΙ, *Arkitektura e kishave të Shqipërisë*, Uegen, Tirana 2004, p. 59.

Gllavenica is mentioned during the first Norman disembarkation in the Albanian coast during the end of the 9th century. During the second Norman campaign of the years 1107-1108, the Norman noble Robert de Monteforte was killed in Gllavenica. Even while retaining the title of Duke, he was promptly buried and on his grave was placed the column of stone on which the inscription of the return of King Boris to Christianity was inscribed.

While not knowing the greek language, the stonemason wrote in the remaining part of the column 14 verses in the latin language. +Hic est subpositus de Forti Mon(t) e Robert(us) Corpore formosus prob(us) armis vir generos(us) Subduce Normanni Cuntis quoq inventutis dives floreret in anni(s) Deseruit mundun D(omi)niq(ue petendo sepulcr(um) Hic obiit Ph(o)eb(o) (i)a(m) sub Libra quat(er) ort(o) Det Roberto tib(i) (S)ua gandia rex para(dis). “+Here lies Robert de Forti Monte. Graceful manly body, courageous at arms, generous man, deputy commander of the Normans. He led and was above all the English, being at the most beautiful age of youth, he left this earth while in search for his lords grave. In here, he died young, when the sun bore for the fourth time at Libras Costellation. May the King of the Paradise give you his joys, o Robert”.³⁸ The column of stone served as an epitaph for the norman knight.³⁹

The wars developed during the 12th century brought the change of the jurisdiction of the episcopates. After the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1204 the coastal part of Albania was occupied by the venetians. Under these historical circumstances, the episcopate of Gllavenica and Kanina, being unable to keep intact the relations with the coastal cities occupied by Venice, was put under the jurisdiction of Berat. Years later, with the ottoman invasion, the episcopate of Gllavenica was disestablished in order to leave the place to the episcopate of Berati, Kanina and Shpati.

From the inscription on the Epitaph of Gllavenica, it was found out that during the year 1373, leading the episcopate of Gllavenica was the bishop Kalist, which held the ecclesiastical title επισκο/που Κα/ληστου / Γλαβεν/γτζης / και Βελ(λ)αγραδον “Bishop Kalist of Gllavenica and Berat”. From this fact we learn of the administrative importance the bishop of Gllavenica had. We’re not dealing here with the merging of 2 different Episcopal titles in one, nor with leading 2 different episcopates by the same bishop. First the bishop held the title Ο Γλαβενίτζης ήτοι Άκροκεραυνίας which means “of Gllavenica or of Akrokeravnia”.⁴⁰

Inside the epitaph you can find the emblematic cross of the bishop of Gllavenica, Kalist which was the creator of the epitaph. The cross stands on the maket of a church. There is a green crown on the cross. In the crosses area, appears written in byzantine greek: IC XC which means Jesus Christ. The cross is embroidered by gold washed silver strings. The frame of the crosses flanks is embroidered by a red string. On the right flank of the cross is portrayed a red lamp. The cross is appears put inside a aureol embroidered by gold washed silver strings. The field and the aureol are decorated with blue, red and yellow floral motifs.

In March 10 of the year 1937, the teache M. Milova found in Ballsh an inscription, from which we learn that in November 4, 1751 the bishop of Gllavenica, Nikifor Agavati has died. Μηνι νοε(μβριω) δ. Ημερα / παρας(κ)ευη εκουμηθη / ω αγι(ος) αρχιε(ρ)ευσ Γλαβηνητ / ζης (;) Νικηφορ(ος) ο Αγαβατης / ετ(ος) Α Ψ Ν Α (=1751). “The month November 4th. Friday. The Saint bishop of Gllavenica (?) Nikifor Agavati has slept, year 1751”.⁴¹ According to Theofan Popa, the fact that the last bishop of the episcopate of Gllavenica has died in the

³⁸ TH. POPA, *Mbishkrime të kishave në Shqipëri*, no. 83, Tirana 1998, p. 80.

³⁹ I. GJIKI, A është Gllavenica mesjetare Ballshi i sotëm?, *Fjala*, No. 179, 24-30 April, 2005, p. 7.

⁴⁰ TH. POPA, Glavenica e lashtë dhe Ballshi i sotëm, *Studime Historike*, 2, 1964, p. 239.

⁴¹ TH. POPA, *Mbishkrime të kishave në Shqipëri*, no. 127, Tirana 1998, p. 101.

year 1751, while Ballsh was totally Islamized and the Episcopal centre was being abandoned, makes us think that it might have been some old bishop who spent his last years at the Saint Marys monastery.⁴²

References

1. ALEKSUDHI, *Përshkrim i shkurtër historik i Mitropolisë së Shenjtë të Beratit*, Translated from greek by Vasil Nika, Corfu 1868.
2. MEKSI, *Arkitektura e kishave të Shqipërisë*, Uegen, Tiranë 2004.
3. MEKSI, Arkitektura Paleokristianë në Shqipëri, *Monumentet*, 2, 1985, p. 21.
4. GJKA, A është Gllavenica mesjetare Ballshi i sotëm?, *Fjala*, No. 179, 24-30 April, 2005, p.7.
5. GJKA, *Bylisi i Ilirisë*, Ymeraj, Fier 2011.
6. K. ZHEKU, Gllavenica dhe problemi i lokalizimit të saj, *Monumentet*, 2, 1987, p. 97.
7. K. ZHEKU, Krishtërimi në Shqipëri gjatë shekujve V-VI, *Ngjallja*, Mars 1994, p. 9.
8. M. LABI, Arkitektura kishtare paleokristiane në Shqipëri, *Studime Muzeologjike*, 4, 2014, Tirana, p. 5-13.
9. M. LABI, *Bazilika "Fjetja e Hyllindëses" në Ballsh dhe Peshkopata e Gllavenicës*, Gazeta Shqiptare, September 6, 2016, p. 18-19.
10. M. ZEQQ, *Hulumtime arkeologjike*, Albanopol, Tirana, 2009.
11. N. CEKA, S. MUÇAJ, *Bylisi*, Migjeni, Tirana 2004.
12. S. ANAMALI, Bazilika e Ballshit, *Iliria*, 7-8, 1977-1978, p. 301-306.
13. S. ANAMALI, Rreth skulpturës dekorative arkitektonike të bazilikës së Ballshit, *Iliria*, 2, 1981, p. 237-242.
14. S. MUÇAJ, Dy monumente të antikitetit të vonë në Bylis, *Iliria*, 1, 1986, p. 321-327.
15. TH. POPA, Glavenica e lashtë dhe Ballshi i sotëm, *Studime Historike*, 2, 1964, p. 240.
16. TH. POPA, *Mbishkrime të kishave në Shqipëri*, Akademia e Shkencave, Tirana, 1998.
17. A. ΑΛΕΞΟΔΗ, *Σύντομος Ιστορική Περιγραφή της Ιερας Μητροπολεως Βελεγραδων*, Κερκυρα 1868.

Table of Figures

- Fig.1. The inscription of Pakatinoi
 Fig.2. Stone block with inscription
 Fig.3. Stone block with inscription
 Fig.4. Arch from Saint Marys church in Ballsh
 Fig.5. Pilaster from Saint Marys church in Ballsh
 Fig.6. The rubble of the church of Saint Mary in Ballsh
 Fig.7. Boris, the king of bulgarians

⁴² TH. POPA, Glavenica e lashtë dhe Ballshi i sotëm, *Studime Historike*, 2, 1964, p. 240.